

## **Living Through a Revolution**

### **Amateur Documentary photos of the 1956 Revolution**

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### **Abstract**

The three sources of the 1956 Hungarian revolution’s visual documentation are the photo reports of the Hungarian Press Agency (MTI), the photos of foreign correspondents, and thousands of amateur photographs. I focus primarily on the images of amateur photographers: I briefly address the problems of identification and introduce the most important thematic units. I also attempt an explanation for the lack of important content elements, as well as the over-representation of some thematic issues. Amateur photographs are standard sources of microhistory. They are not necessarily linked to special events, and most of the subjects they documented have principally symbolic meanings. They provide the personal perspective of those who have sustained history. Multiple frames can be attached to a single photo, but the thematic groups without any further explanation designate the most important impressions the revolution left on the amateur photographers. It was rather a special co-creational work for everyone to make the meaning of the revolution understand, to create a common impression they can preserve for the future generations. I attempt to define the most important of these symbolic groups and the reasons for creating them.

**Key words:** 1956, revolution, amateur documentary photos, demolishing visual symbols, creating visual symbols

The revolution of 1956 broke out on the 23rd October, and up to its repression in November thousands of photographs documented this at once glorious and tragic episode of Hungarian history. These photos have three sources: Reporters from the Hungarian Press Agency (MTI) travelled by bicycle to capture the events of the revolution day to day. They did it on their free will, and they were aware that their photos might not be published. With the end of censorship, the former limitations had ceased to exist, but the dense events and the confusion of the days hindered the best practice of image editing of peacetime. Yet the correspondents kept working. They knew they were living history. The pictures they shot were eventually confiscated by the secret service. What remained for the public is thanks to the high-quality reproductions that come from the contacts the correspondents made right after the revolution. These photographs can be researched today at the national press agency, called MTVA<sup>1</sup>, successor of MTI.

Three to four days after the outbreak, foreign correspondents from major press agencies arrived in the country, including Erich Lessing from Magnum, Franz Goess and Jean Pierre Pedrazzini from Paris Match, and John Sadovy from Life Magazin. Mario de Biasi, Anders Engmann, Rolf Gillhausen, Russel Melcher, Michael Rougier, and many others also reported from Budapest during those days.

The third group of photographers who captured the significant events of the revolution with their camera were the amateurs. They wanted to record the experience of history for themselves and preserve the images for the future at great personal risk. I focus primarily on them. I will briefly address the problems of image identification and introduce the most important thematic units. I will also attempt an explanation for the lack of important content elements.

The content of the images was dangerous. During the retaliation period photos were used as incriminating evidence. If someone was identified with weapons in his hand, this could lead to his execution. The confiscated photos were collected in thematic albums for investigations, mixed up with clippings and reproductions of foreign newspapers. The albums were shown to the witnesses and the victims during the production of evidence. These albums are still preserved, annexed to court files in the National Security Archive in Budapest<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://archivum.mtva.hu/photobank/?query=1956>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.abtl.hu/english-information>

That is the explanation for the fact that faces, especially those of the freedom fighters are rarely recognisable in the photos. For other, more complicated reasons, very few photos survived the revolution in the countryside. Some foreign correspondents happened to be there just by chance, for instance Pedrazzini at a burial of the victims of a shooting (by the security police) in Mosonmagyaróvár. Of the newly formed political parties, revolutionary committees, or Workers Councils hardly a few photos remained. The amateurs were not present at such political events, and in general, fewer amateurs took photos in the countryside than in Budapest.

Photos capturing the October 23 demonstration are also extraordinarily rare. They are mostly the work of Hungarian correspondents, who were ex officio present at the pre-announced demonstration. Their mission shifted throughout the day: they became chroniclers of a revolution. The fate of Erich Lessing's pictures is interesting. Lessing arrived in Hungary on October 26, among the firsts. That same day, he shot pictures of the removal of the Lenin portrait in Győr's City Hall, a symbolic act of breaking with the past, and travelled on to Budapest. His famous photo linked to the outbreak of the revolution was actually taken 6-8 days later, at another demonstration.<sup>3</sup> The image of the protesters came to symbolize the outbreak of the revolution in the public mind, and a number of publications, even state commemorations have used it to this day as the event's visual representation.

What makes an image true? In general, it is the belief that we accept it as a visual proof of an event. According to Hans Belting, images provide us with information that we would not otherwise have access to, so we can be convinced about the content, and live through its emotional impact on us<sup>4</sup>. Due to this belief a connotation relates so closely to the image that it becomes a symbol: we identify the image with the idea it represents. This is true even if the image was taken not then and there, as the meaning it was later endowed with.

We do have amateur photos which were taken at the very first demonstration: their survival is almost a miracle. The images taken by Dr. László Juhász at the mass demonstration on Bem Square are not very successful aesthetically, but they are crucial documents of the first major demonstration in Buda. Just a few photographer were on the streets on this first day – they had no way of knowing in the morning that by afternoon they would be experiencing a revolution. The different temperament of a professional and an amateur photographer is well distinguishable. Lessing is ahead of the crowd and

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<sup>3</sup> Erich Lessing, *Budapest 1956, a forradalom* (Budapest: 1956 Intézet, 2006)

<sup>4</sup>Hans Belting, *A hiteles kép. Képviták mint hitviták* (Budapest: Atlantisz, 2013)

faces them from close up: this is why the image of the enthusiastic, singing crowd had become iconic. The Hungarian correspondents are also in the centre of the crowd: they took close-up shots of the speakers. The amateur Juhász, by contrast, is there and is not - not knowing what will become of it all. He walks in front of the protesters with his camera like Lessing, but captures the crowd waving the Polish flag from far across the street. He never approaches the centre as the professional reporter does but stays on the edge. This is why we can only see the crowd from behind: people climbing a lamppost, standing on truck platforms signal the extraordinary nature of the moment: such disorganized and uncontrolled participation in a controlled demonstration was not possible during the dictatorship.

Most of the photographs were taken during the second phase of the revolution, the period of consolidation, after the announced ceasefire, 28<sup>th</sup> October, when the population had to face the devastation. Foreign correspondents also arrived in the largest numbers in the days of the ceasefire. Thanks to the peaceful days amateur photographers ventured out and photographed what was in front of them: traces of street fights, inscriptions, barricades, overturned trams. After the Soviet invasion in November the reporters went home, ordinary people retreated first to the cellars and then to their homes, which had to be restored after the fight in the newly formed Soviet-type dictatorship, in the shadow of a lost revolution. Their pictures became a direct source of danger, so they had to be hidden in the most diverse places. Even in the 2000s, film reels from chandelier rods, steel-cassettes hidden under parquet floors, were found and brought to the 1956 Institute, where they were preserved.

Amateurs carefully avoided dangerous places and also the revolutionaries. The typical amateur may be thought of as one of them, Szentpétery Tibor describes himself: "I was in the streets of Budapest every day with my camera hanging around my neck, under a trench coat, and recorded what I've experienced ... and I kept these recordings for posterity – like the hundreds of my pictures taken previously in the Don bend."<sup>5</sup> Szentpétery was a war correspondent during WWII, and fortunately his photo shots are preserved. Needless to say, from the outbreak of the revolution, he has been following events with his camera. Although this makes him special, his methods are similar to those of several amateurs: he exposed 9 black and white Leica rolls, which made a total of 251 exposures. He processed them himself in his own lab, organized them into albums and labelled the 8x12 enlargements. He hid

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<sup>5</sup> András Bán: „Rögzítettem, amit megéltem” Dr Szentpétery Tibor ’56-os fotói In: *56-s fényképek gyűjteményekben*, ed. András Kákóczki and György Sümegi. (Miskolc: Miskolci Galéria, 2007),

his pictures in the attic of their villa, with the knowledge of his family. His pictures show the perspective of the former war correspondent: they were composed more consciously than the average amateurs'. It was less risky to develop the pictures at home. Those who were afraid to take their rolls to the local photography lab, preserved just negatives. Of course, this often caused damage to the images. In many cases, only home-made paper prints remained, which also often suffered damage during concealment. After the regime change the amateur images popping up had the imprints of obsolescence, damage. They are also often decomposed, blurred and fuzzy. These errors did not detract from the value of the images: they add another dimension, the story of the years passed since their exposure. The visible signs of deterioration authenticate the content and increase their dramatic impact. Thus the traces of fading became an integral part of their iconography.

At first glance, the images appear to be entirely contingent. There are incidents with very little image -- conspicuously no picture of the fights from October 23 to 28 -- and there are some over-represented among them. Such incident is the siege of the Central Party House at Köztársaság Square and the subsequent executions of its defenders. This content inequality is no accident. It was mostly the foreign correspondents who shot photos of the freedom fighters. However, most of these images were staged: the correspondents visited the key sites during the days of the ceasefire and asked their subjects to act "as if ..." -- there was little real-world reporting among their images.

The October 30 siege on Republic Square is only a modest episode according to the historical narrative.<sup>6</sup> Yet, apart from the pictures of the demonstrations, this has become one of the best-known sites of the revolution. There are several reasons for this overrepresentation: Jean Pierre Pedrazzini suffered a fatal wound here attempting to take photos of an ongoing fight, his last set was published by Paris Match after his death. John Sadovy from Life Magazine captured the brutal execution of security police guards a few hours later. His close-ups later became the most important visual evidence of brutality during the retaliation period after the revolution. These pictures also compensated for the lack of real fight-photos. The Party House defenders were executed with volley fire, followed by further lynching on the street. Multitude of amateur photos preserve the image of the corpse hanging by the foot and the crowd humiliating it. Then a surreal hysterical incident occurred: According to urban legend, political captives were held imprisoned and tortured in secret dungeons below the surface of the park of the Party House. Numerous shots have been made of people lying on the

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<sup>6</sup> János Rainer M.: Egy képsor funkcióváltása, 1956-2006 In: *56-s fényképek gyűjteményekben*, edited by András Kákóczki and György Sümegi, (Miskolc: Miskolci Galéria, 2007), 8.

ground, listening, searching for signs of life from below. The lengthy process of the digging could be documented risk-free, perhaps in the belief that they would be present at the release of the prisoners. The closed publicity of the fifties, the sudden outbreak of the revolution, later the subsequent concealment and the retaliation was a hotbed of emerging legends and myths. The image of spades in front of the party house is an important visual proof of myth formation, one of the reasons for the visual representation of the event.

The images about the fate of the Party House offer a good example of various interpretations and uses. The pictures were published in the international press, and a few months later official propaganda "recycled" them, in a context opposite to the original. The same photo can be used for multiple purposes, even with conflicting meaning. The ideology of a picture is just a result of different connotations and text attachments: the images of the fight simultaneously became evidence of struggle and evidence of brutality – depending on the purpose of use. The first was proved by the Life Magazine's sequences,<sup>7</sup> the latter by the so-called "White Paper"<sup>8</sup>, a publication of the Communist Party in 1957, forming the canon of history remaining valid until 1989. The same pictures received another function after the revolution, serving for the identification of participants in the trials. The defendants were executed.

### Identification

Identifying events and persons in the pictures is a complex issue. The identification of the person in the photo is closely linked to the memory problem of the revolution. After 1989 political parties traced their origins back to the 56 tradition, that's the reason, that the revolution still has strong political connotations even today. A construction of memory always presents expectations of the present. The identification of a person or event raises the same problem. The identity of someone in the picture – because of the romantic associations relating to the past, the heroic issue, and because it's an important element of the present's personality - is equally important to historical researchers, for private memories, and for politicians. Personal identity is a building stone of myth and legends. An example of the historical identification purposes is the story of the wounded girl with a gun in Russell Melcher's famous portrait, published in Paris Match. Historians Eszter Balázs and Phil Casoir.

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<sup>7</sup> *Hungary's Fight for Freedom: A Special Report in Pictures (By the Editors of Life Magazine)* ed. Henry R. Luce, Life, 1956

<sup>8</sup> Magyar Népköztársaság Minisztertanácsa Tájékoztatási Hivatala: *Ellenforradalmi erők a magyar októberi eseményekben I-II.* (Budapest: 1957), 157.

explored her life and published an important work of social history of the revolutionaries based on photo identification.<sup>9</sup>

Another example of the sensible issue of identification is the political conflict erupted on the 60th anniversary of the revolution, in 2016. Michael Rougier's portrait of a revolutionary boy was mistakenly identified - an actor recognised himself in the picture, and built up a heroic memory construction for himself, but he was unmasked. The family of the real freedom fighter boy filed a suit, demanding public correction of the mistake, to restore their credit. The affair became a national scandal because the picture with the wrong name was used as an iconic symbol of the anniversary, in the focus of the state commemorations. The first uncertain, later lost credit of the photo, the stubborn denial of error, and the slanderous campaign against the real freedom fighter's family led to the loss of credit for the entire anniversary series.<sup>10</sup>

In 1956, only 12 years had passed since the Second World War. Major battles occurred in Budapest again, and much of the city was in ruins after the fights. The first phase of the postwar reconstruction was just completed in the mid-fifties, but not all the Danube-bridges that had been demolished had yet been rebuilt, also Buda Castle was in ruins - as can be seen in the amateur photos selected for the Kaleidoscope project. The consequence of the revolution was that the apartment blocks built on the Grand Boulevard by the turn of the century were destroyed by shelling, and the cobblestones were picked up to erect barricades from them. Public supplies were cut off, breadlines formed, shop windows were broken and looted. The vast majority of the remaining amateur images depict this hopeless, ruined November image of Budapest.

The amateur photographs are classic sources of micro-history. They are not necessarily linked to special events. Sometimes they may offer an answer to the question: *what happened?* but their value is far more exciting than that. They provide the personal perspective of those who have sustained history. The question of *how it happened?* and *what was it like for me?* is more important and relevant. Photographs are the starting points for memory constructs and stories of the past. Memory supplies them with a meaning, but just like the oral history, these constructions are not reliable source

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<sup>9</sup> Eszter Balázs and Phil Casoir: *Budapest hősei*. (Budapest: Scolar, 2016)

<sup>10</sup> Réka Sárközy: A többszörösen újratervezett plakát, avagy ki van a képen? in: *Újratervezések Magyarországon a Jelenkorban*, ed. Márkus Keller and Gábor Tabajdi, *Évkönyv XXIII*. (Budapest: Országos Széchényi Könyvtár 2018), 283-326.



of history: one can approach them with criticism only. A kind of visual history can be made up of them: their authenticity originates from their personality, and provides a visual proof of the event, but how the story is made up of itself, is just a subjective decision. As you have seen, multiple frames can be attached to a single photo. But the thematic groups, without any further explanation designate the most important impressions the revolution affected on the amateur photographers – the average people. Surprisingly the content of these documentary photos – apart from the ruined city - is principally symbolic: people demolishing symbolic statues, graffiti on walls with desires and messages to the unknown Russians, a collection box, graves, candles, new revolutionary symbols. A revolution must have a common meaning for everyone. In the haste after such events there is no time for linguistic definitions: the co-creation of visual symbols could be much more effective.

These amateur photos preserved for us the different stages of co-creation work: from enthusiasm to violence, from demolishing to creation, from happiness to depression.

#### Demolishing – and creating visual symbols

An important motif of the images is the moment of removing the symbols of dictatorship as one of the simplest ways to express the message of the revolution: erase the past, breakup with it forever. Belting says that when power is violent, images of a cult enforced are destroyed. Symbolic violence is characteristic of authoritarian systems. One of the first phases of any rebellion is the elimination of this symbolic violence -- by violence. However, the true target of destruction is not the image, but its adjuster. Many pictures were taken of the removal of red stars from walls, gateways, buildings. The typical ones from the scant rural photographs depict the destruction of a Soviet monument in the center of the small town. The hated symbols are replaced by the revolution's own symbols: the flag with a hole in its centre (with the Stalinist coat of arms cut out), and the various depictions of Kossuth coat of arms (assuming continuity with the 1848 revolutionary tradition) which was also a popular motif of amateur photos. Such pictures were taken at the wrecking of the Stalin monument, like George Fábri's set. (Stalin's statue was removed and broken up on the first night of the revolution.) Fábri, who was a technician, took his pictures around his living environment, nearby Blaha Lujza Square, in the city centre. His album survived: 88 9x12 black and white positives supplemented with some newspaper clippings. Also, the pedestal of the broken Stalin monument, bare of its statue immediately became a visual symbol of the revolution. The ruins on the edge of the City Park became a nice destination for family walks during the ceasefire and a popular subject of photographers: people christened it "Boots Square."



## Purity

The Kádár propaganda called the revolution “counter-revolution,” and the freedom fighters were designated as “hooligans”, and “vandals” and “looters”. Amateur photos refute this. You can see peacefully walking people on most of them, wandering among events, places, the ruins. Another popular subject of the amateur photos was a fully open collection box, asking donations for the victims with the inscription “The purity of our revolution permits to collect for the victims this way.” People proud of the freedom they achieved and also wanted to proof their honesty in the rebelling behaviour.

## Messages

Messages on slips of paper, handouts taped on trees, walls and every possible place were popular subjects of photography. People, looking for their relatives, forming political parties addressed the passers-by illustrating the confusion of those days. Many snapped pictures of wall paintings addressing Soviet soldiers: “*Go home!*” Later, in the days of the already defeated revolution, the content changed to “*Strike!*” which seemed to remain the only hope. Press worked accidentally, getting information was restricted. This direct form of communication had special importance.

## Freedom of Press

There was no television broadcast before 1957, so the main source of information and tool of the hated communist propaganda was the Radio. One of the most important episodes of the revolution in the early days was the occupation of the Hungarian Radio building. This meant restoring freedom of the press. The aforementioned Kossuth coat of arms was hanged on the balcony of the Radio: the shattered facade of the flag gained symbolic content indicating values of the won press freedom.

## Death

A strange topic of the photos is documenting death. Passers-by commemorated All Saints’ Day (the Day of the Dead) in the streets by lighting candles for the known and unidentified victims buried in public parks on 1<sup>st</sup> November, pedestals and playgrounds transformed into spontaneous graveyards. Sometimes they happened to know the victim, but in many cases they did not. People were horrified by the sight of the dead Soviet soldiers in the streets, burned into charcoal and covered with lime – and photographed them.

## Invasion

The last act of the revolution, the Soviet invasion was also documented. Amateurs took great personal risk when they ventured to lean out of their windows to shoot a picture of approaching Soviet tanks. Here, the purpose of the documentation was to document the occupation for posterity, without the slightest hope of disclosure.

#### Solidarity

People felt isolated during the days of the revolution mostly in Budapest, and also needed help in struggling with food shortage, medical emergency. Food trucks from the countryside brought bread to supply Budapest from the first days of the revolution, voluntary red cross cars and trucks were roaming on the streets to find and help casualties. Their presence and help were comforting for the citizens and found them important to preserve in their photographs.

Somehow that is the way documentary photos of the revolution became places of memory circled in the collective memory of families, or a deeply hidden part of it for others. In spite of the decades of suppression and secrecy, the photos, from the very moment they had been taken, were the parts of the revolution's history.

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## Pictures



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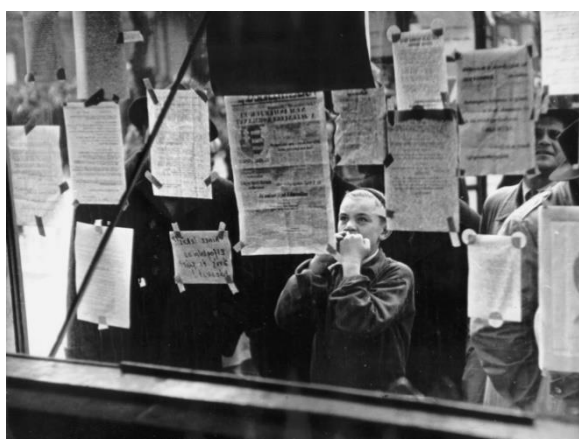
3.



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**Credits:**

1. Dr László Juhász: Demonstration in Budapest, 23rd October 1956
2. Dr László Juhász: Demonstration in Budapest, 23rd October 1956
3. György Fábri: Demolition of the Stalin Statue 24th October 1956
4. Dr Tibor Szentpétery: „Boots’s Square” – The Ruins of the Stalin Statue
5. Dr Tibor Szentpétery: Open Collection Box for the Victims
6. Dr Tibor Szentpétery: Boy Reading Flyers on a Shopwindow
7. György Fábri: Tombs in a Public Square 1st November 1956
8. György Fábri: Free Hungarian Radio
9. Dr Tibor Szentpétery: Red Cross Truck in Budapest